

Revisiting Mary Lum Girard

by Dr. Marilyn A. Lambert

Answers to the question of Mary Lum Girard's significance in the life of her husband seem clear. Why can't we accept them?

On June 17, 2009 an article appeared in a community newspaper, the *Weekly Press*, again raising questions about Mary Lum Girard: her marriage, mental illness, commitment to Pennsylvania Hospital, death, and burial. The article renewed my interest in why there continues to be confusion and controversy about her relationship with Stephen Girard and her resting place.

What we know is that there is an abundance of misinformation about the Girards' life together and a willingness to accept and perpetuate inaccuracies and myths about them. Some propose that Mary Lum Girard was insignificant in Stephen Girard's life. Much of what we believe to be accurate is presented in biographies of Stephen Girard. But, we must consider the position of each writer in order to determine the efficacy of their perspective: Simpson(1832), a disgruntled employee; Ingram(1885), a relative of Stephen Girard; McMaster(1918) commissioned by the Board of City Trusts; and Herrick (1923) president of Girard College and former student of McMaster. The missing voice is Stephen Girard himself. An examination of the actual correspondence of Mr. Girard and documentation from the records of Pennsylvania Hospital provide us with a more thorough picture of the

Girards' early life together; the onset, escalation, and treatment of Mrs. Girard's illness; the impact of that mental illness on her marriage — chaos caused, compassion shown,— and her final commitment to and subsequent burial on the grounds of Pennsylvania Hospital.

In spite of differences in age, social status, and religion, Mary and Stephen Girard were married on June 6, 1777. In a letter to his father, Mr. Girard says, "I have taken a wife — without fortune it is true — but whom I love and with whom I live happily." Stephen's brother Jean visited with the family in late 1780. Following that visit, correspondence from Jean included comments of affection and hope for

mutual happiness, enjoy the pleasures of life." From 1783 to 1785, Jean continued to write remembrances and send gifts to the Girards.

Then, in 1785 Mr. Girard began to report changes in his wife's behavior; a transformation from outgoing and amiable to hostile and violent. In a letter to his brother, in 1785, Stephen writes, "I fear I have lost forever the peace which a certain success should procure for life in this world." From Jean we hear: "I do truly pity the frightful state I imagine you to be in, above all knowing the regard and love you bear your wife..."

An investigation of the papers of Stephen Girard, found in the

Where's Mary? If you would like to physically revisit Mary Lum Girard you have choices: the grounds of the Pennsylvania Hospital where she is buried but there is no marker; the lawn of the Lambert's residence in West Mount Airy, PA, where she is not buried but there is a marker; a memorial on the campus of Girard College.

the future. "Be so kind as to assure my dear sister-in-law of my true affection. I long for embracing her and the family. If God grants my wishes I shall one day live with you both, and there, wishing for your



archives at Girard College and the American Philosophical Society, clearly show that, between 1785 and 1790, Mr. Girard made consistent and sustained efforts to address or seek a cure for the mental illness that plagued his wife and their marriage. A "treatment" would be tried, symptoms would subside and Mary would be brought home. Symptoms would surface again, another treatment or setting would be tried and another cycle would begin. In 1785 there were few, if any, standards for diagnosing or treating mental illness.

Evidence of these "consistent and sustained efforts" includes:

Initial treatment with opium, provided by a neighbor who was a physician. Opium was the standard treatment at that time.

In the fall of 1785, Mary was admitted to Pennsylvania Hospital for the first time and was diagnosed as insane. After a short stay, she was brought home.

When the symptoms returned, Mrs. Girard was sent to a German Cloister in Ephrata, Pennsylvania that was said to have experience with people who displayed "disruptive behavior."

Several times, Mrs. Girard, accompanied by her mother, was sent to the Girard home in Mt. Holly, N.J. where she could "rest." Each time, symptoms would subside and she would return home.

Finally, in 1790, Pennsylvania Hospital, the first hospital to provide for the "reception and relief of lunatics" was to become the setting in which Mrs. Girard would spend the rest of her life. The official commitment to Pennsylvania Hospital was signed by Samuel Coates, John Foulke, and John Jones — all prominent physicians in Philadelphia. The actual date of admission to the hospital is unclear. Commitment papers signed by the physicians and some hospital records indicate that Mary Lum Girard was admitted in August, 1790. Other records indicate a December, 1790 date.

It is important to note that Mr. Girard did have an alternative. The Philadelphia City Almshouse had been sheltering homeless and "unruly lunatics" since the 1730's. Although the almshouse and hospital both reflected a general concern with the confinement of "lunatics" and the disorderly, they had quite different social profiles: one defined by the provisions of relief for families and neighbors affected by the actions of the mentally ill, the other by the practice of medicine. Within the hospital setting there was also an alternative: the ward or a separate "sitting room" with access to the grounds. Again, Stephen Girard continued to make the choice to provide the best available care for his wife — a private sitting room, in a hospital setting.

Anyone who has ever lived with someone who suffers from a mental illness should surely understand the frustration and anguish Girard expressed in some of the correspondence sent to relatives and business associates just prior to his wife being institutionalized.

Mary Lum Girard died and was buried September 13, 1815 on the grounds of Pennsylvania Hospital, as documented in *The History of Pennsylvania Hospital, 1751 – 1895*, authorized by the Board of Managers. The burial was described in the writings and lectures of William Wagner, a long-term, trusted employee of Stephen Girard. Mr. Girard was in attendance.

It appears from these records that, when Stephen Girard stated, "My deeds must be my life. When I am dead, my actions must speak for me," he was referring to his marriage as well as his business enterprises and philanthropy.

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